

THE PASSING OF THE GODS,
by V. F. Calverton. Charles
Scribner's Sons, New York,
1934.

In this work Calverton combines the elaboration of an essentially new and very fruitful approach to the problem of religion with a consecutive summary of the main results of that social critique of religion which is one of the most characteristic features of modern thought. To paraphrase the Young Hegelians, it is the annihilation of religion thru critical social consciousness.

The problem that must face every serious student of the question is: What function has religion exercised that it has persisted as a world force thru the ages in spite of its (to us) manifest irrationality? What are the roots of religion and where are they to be sought? What is the nature of the religious mentality? What has been the relation of religion to the general life of mankind? These are some of the questions that this book tries to answer.

Calverton's method of analysis is thoroly sound, based as it is on historical materialism. "Religion is not, in my contention," he insists, "an individual reality but a social experience . . . To understand religion, therefore, one must study not only its psychological characteristics but its sociological origins . . . In order to understand religion, it is necessary to do more than study it as an isolated institution or force; what is more important is to study the interests it has served, the interests which inspired its creation and perpetuated its function." He also does quite well in defining his subject in such a way as to refer to religion as it has actually appeared in human history and not to the vague "cosmic religion" of an Einstein, for example, in which the term is used without the slightest regard to its historical content.

Approaching the problem from this angle Calverton comes to the conclusion which is the main thesis of this volume: "Religion derives its power over the human race by virtue of reading the material interests of man into the scheme of the universe." Or to put it more concretely—Religion has persisted as a world force because it has promised man effective power over his environment, natural and social. On the basis of this, its social function, a many-branched spiritual superstructure has arisen of characteristic beliefs, emotions, usages, a veritable complex of the social consciousness, a "cultural compulsive," surviving until the present day. This social complex, this compulsive drive to religion, is in its very nature virtually inaccessible to reason; it can be affected only by undermining its social base, by depriving it of the social interests nourishing it. Self-conscious rational action in the field of nature and of society is the antithesis of religion and entirely fatal to it because it robs it of its age-old power function. And self-conscious rational action can be achieved by mankind to a full extent only in a classless socialist society in which man is at last master of his own fate. To this conclusion, explicitly stated, Calverton brings his study.

The fruitfulness of the approach here outlined is attested by the whole book for, with it as a clue, the author traces the various aspects of the problem of religion, piling up a vast amount of anthropological and historical data. In this limited space I can do no more than call attention to the most profound of these studies, the chapter on "The Ego and the Religious Compulsive," which penetrates searchingly into the spiritual life of man under religion.

This work is bound to take its place immediately as the outstanding discussion of religion from the modern sociological standpoint. Some of its particular conclusions may probably be shaken by subsequent criticism and investigation but its fundamental thesis, that religion can be understood only if it is conceived as a practical instrument of power in the social life-process of mankind, seems to me to be almost unchallengeable.

And the originality and wealth of illustration with which Calverton develops this theme makes for some exciting reading.

WILL HERBERG